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EXPOSITORY STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

III. ISAAC AND JACOB

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ISAAC a LOVER OF PEACE: GEN. 26:12–25[1]

I. LITERARY SOURCES

This chapter is practically all from the Jehovist document; cf. vss. 2, 12, 22, 28, 29, where Jehovah is the name for the Deity. Here and there, however, are traces of a later hand. Verse 15, for example, interrupts the sequence of vss. 14 and 16. Its object is to prepare the way for vs. 18, and to connect the story of Isaac with that of Abraham (cf. Gen. 21:25). But for all practical purposes the chapter may be regarded as a unity.

II. EXPOSITION

The facts which tradition recorded about the career of Isaac are very few, and, broadly speaking, his story is but a pale duplicate of the story of his greater father. Except that we are told (if the translation be correct) that he "went out to meditate in the field at the eventide" —and this translation is more than doubtful—there is hardly any distinctive trait in the story which helps us to individualize him. The episode told earlier in this chapter (26:1–11) of his denial of his wife had already been told twice in the narrative of Abraham (Gen., chaps. 12 and 20). This attests the great popularity of the story, but that is all we can say. In the Isaac narrative it may be nothing more than a duplicate version of the Abraham story. Similarly the story of the well of Beersheba told here (26:32, 33) appears also—though the word receives a different explanation—in the Abraham narrative (21:31). There is reason to believe that the traditions about Isaac may once have been more numerous than those recorded in Genesis; but, as it is, we can form no really clear and individual picture of the man. He has been overshadowed by his father and his son.

The story represents him, however, as prospering—growing rich in flocks and herds (vss. 12–14). This, as we have seen, is in accordance with the ancient idea that the elect must prosper, and that the divine favor is manifested in material things. And just as the wealth of Abraham led to

[1] International Sunday-School Lesson for March 10, 1907.

strife and to his ultimate separation from Lot, so the wealth of Isaac brought upon him the envy of the Philistines, whose district he was consequently obliged to leave. There can be little doubt that this very brief story, and the one which follows it, preserve a faint reminiscence of historical fact. There had been some misunderstanding, and no doubt strife, between the ancestors of Israel and the people of Gerar, which was finally settled by treaty at Beersheba. This treaty, as we have seen, is doubly attested —both in the Abraham and in the Isaac group of stories.

According to vss. 18–22, the particular form that the opposition to Isaac took was the stopping of his wells. Water is of the utmost consequence to the flock, and wells were naturally a common object of strife. It is not necessary, however, to suppose that the wells really received their names from these particular incidents. The Hebrew words by which the wells are named really mean "contention," "enmity," and "broad places;" and the stories which attach to them may well have been suggested by the words themselves to the facile imagination of those early people. Those who think such an explanation impossible should remember that there are two accounts given of the origin of the name "Beersheba": one in this very chapter, which explains it as the well of the oath (26:31, 33), and another in 21:30, 31, which regards it as the well of the seven. Other illustrations could be adduced, which make it quite certain that some stories owe their origin to naïve etymological curiosity; that is, that they are attempts to explain the names of people or things.

Vss. 23–25. There is nothing very definite or concrete about this passage. It simply repeats and confirms to Isaac the blessing promised to Abraham, and intimates that Isaac acknowledged the appearance of his God, as was customary, by an act of worship; and by the altar which he erected, Beersheba was constituted a sanctuary. In the author's own time Beersheba was a sacred place; and this story is one explanation (cf. 21:33) of the origin of its sanctity.

III. APPLICATION

It cannot be said that this passage is rich in homiletic application. It has few independent traits of its own, the first section (vss. 12–17) bearing a general resemblance to the story of Abraham and Lot in chap. 13, and the last (vss. 23–25) repeating the promise to Abraham. No doubt the writer of the middle section (vss. 18–22) intended to suggest that the broad place, where there is room and fertility, is reached only after strife or enmity or opposition of some kind—a lesson already powerfully enforced, under other aspects, by the experience of Abraham. There is no royal road to success; the way to Rehoboth is through Esek and Sitnah.

There is also much profound observation of life in the words of vs. 14: "he became very great and had possessions of flocks and herds and a great household: *and the Philistines envied him.*" The heels of prosperity are dogged by envy; to succeed is to secure the envy of the Philistines.

Incidentally a very suggestive thought is touched in vs. 19: "Isaac's servants digged in the valley, and found there a well of springing water." Striking as this picture is, the Hebrew is more striking still: "a well of *living* water." The idea is suggested that it is the man who digs that finds the living water. Living water for living men: for men who will steadily and bravely cut their way through all difficulty and impediment. The clear, cool water is not to be had for the wishing, but for the digging. Thus, and thus only, can we reach the water, and only thus do we deserve it. Many lives are sapless, unrefreshed by living water, because there has been no digging. We will do nothing more than scratch the surface: most often not even that. We stand lazily upon it, without piercing through it to the thing that would refresh us. We forget that, if we descend to the depths, God is there. There is no living water for the man who will not dig.

How seldom, for example, is study a delight! No great book, least of all Scripture, will yield up all its secrets unless to the fierce persistence of the digger; for those secrets are hidden in the depths. We move airily across its chapters, when we should pause and assure ourselves that deep down are living waters. Surface meanings are for idle souls; the more patiently and prayerfully we search the depths, the more surely and abundantly shall we find that well of water which springeth up unto everlasting life.[2]

JACOB AND ESAU: GEN. 27:15–23; 41–45[3]

I. LITERARY SOURCES

This whole chapter, with the exception of the last verse, is often ascribed in its entirety to the Jehovist. A more subtle and rigorous analysis, however, has made it probable that the Elohist has also contributed to the story which the chapter contains. According to one version—if this analysis be correct—Jacob deceives Isaac by wearing goatskin on his hands and neck, and, consistently with this, the blind Isaac "feels" his son; according to the other version, he deceives him by wearing Esau's clothes, and, consistently with this, Isaac smells the raiment. Whether this analysis be justified or not, the story, as we now have it, has been very skilfully written, and may be regarded, for all practical purposes, as a unity.

[2] Cf. my volume, *In the Hour of Silence*, pp. 131–35 (Revell).

[3] International Sunday-School Lesson for March 17, 1907.

II. EXPOSITION

Vs. 15. The blessing was a religious act, and on such an occasion Esau would naturally have worn his best suit. This appears, no doubt in accordance with custom, to have been in the keeping of the mother, who accordingly secures it for Jacob, in order to insure the success of the deception. This is one version; in the other, she puts goatskin on his hands and neck. There may be no very convincing reason why these two acts should be regarded as parallel accounts of the deception; but there is an initial probability that the Jehovist and the Elohist had each his story of deception, and, in any case, the method of deception by means of Esau's clothes is much more subtle and delicate than the other.

The manner in which Jacob wins the blessing is peculiarly offensive to our moral sense. His father is old, supposed to be dying, and blind, and the advantage taken by Jacob of his blindness seems to us more than usually mean. The old man has the gravest doubts as to the identity of his son, but Jacob has made every possible preparation to throw him off his guard; and finally, to disarm his suspicion, he has the effrontery to resort to a deliberate lie: "Jehovah thy God sent me good speed." The lie is all the more disgraceful in that it implicated the divine name. There is something calculating, cold-blooded, and repulsive to a modern taste about the conduct of Jacob throughout this critical scene.

There is always, however, a danger of reading modern ideas into our interpretation of ancient books; and it may be doubted whether those who told and listened to such stories in early Hebrew times were shocked and offended by them as we are. Gunkel has put forward some interesting considerations which suggest that, so far from being offended, they were amused at the clever cunning of their great ancestor, and proud of its triumphant issue. He points out that strictly historical interpretation does not justify us in drawing the morals from the Jacob story which are customarily drawn. Instead, he argues, of being purified of his duplicity by his long exile, he only learns his lesson all the more perfectly; he surpasses Laban in his own art, and shows himself a perfect master of it by his treatment of his brother after his return (33:12–17). Again, he urges, we cannot fail to feel that the story abounds in humor. What hearer could help laughing as he hears of Jacob's attempt to imitate Esau's rough, hairy skin by putting goatskin on his hands and neck? The story they were listening to was that of their own ancestor, and it must have been originally told to glorify him; in his triumphant cunning they find, with delight, their own character reflected. Gunkel even supposes that, in the oldest version of the story, God may have been pleased with Jacob precisely

because of his skill and cunning, but that this trait, and no doubt others similar, were obliterated by the finer moral sense of a later generation. Morality has a history: a skilfully planned piece of deception may be admired for the ability it evinces, while a later and finer moral sense may regard it as reprehensible or even despicable.

There is probably a good deal of truth in Gunkel's contentions. Throughout Genesis we have always two things to consider: first, the impression made by the stories upon the earlier generations among whom they were first circulated; and, secondly, the impression made upon the maturer moral sense of later times. And we must never forget that the writers of these documents were men of fine, sensitive, ethical temper. The material which they handled was brought to them by tradition from times which were rough and rude; but they handled that material in the spirit of the prophets, and to illustrate the great truths of morality and religion.

That this is so, is made very plain by the sequel, vss. 41–45. Jacob must suffer. Esau begins to plan revenge, and his revenge will take the form of murder. To escape this fate the ever elert and enterprising Rebekah urges Jacob to take to flight. He is to go to Haran for a few days. She speaks of his absence as only for a few days, either by way of consolation, or because she really thought it would be brief: she was counting on Esau's superficial nature, and on his anger and resentment being spent in a day or two. If Jacob remained in sight, he would be murdered by Esau; and then Esau would have to take to instant flight, for in accordance with eastern law, the blood-avenger would be on his heels, and thus she would be "bereaved of both her sons in one day."

III. APPLICATION

It will readily be seen that, if Gunkel's view of the passage be correct, much of the customary homiletic use of it will fall to the ground. But on any view of the story, it illustrates a very valuable moral lesson—that *deception is heavily punished.* It is impossible to hide long in a refuge of lies: the rains will come and wash the refuge away, and the liar will have to start upon a long and weary flight. It may be that the earlier narrators regarded the deception as clever; but, clever or sinful, it was costly. The few days of absence contemplated by Rebekah lengthened into years, and we never read that she and Jacob met again. He suffered the hardships of separation from those he loved, and exile in a foreign land; and, in addition to those natural hardships, he had special crosses of his own. And all because he had one day played false. Men forget that the days do not stand by themselves; they are linked mysteriously each to each. What

we sow today, we shall reap tomorrow. And not the sharpest eyes in the world can foresee all the consequences of our acts. We can see only a very little way; no man is clever enough to see to the end. Apart altogether from the immorality of it, sin is simply not worth while. The world is so made that the path of the transgressor is hard. Deception may enable a man to score a temporary success, but he will pay dearly for it in the long run, if not soon. It may drive him away from the land and the friends he loves, and plunge his life into disaster and sorrow.

JACOB'S VISION AND GOD'S PROMISE: GEN. 28:1–5, 10–22[4]

I. LITERARY SOURCES

All three documents which constitute the Book of Genesis are represented in this passage. The first five verses (together with 27:46) are from the late Priestly Document. With its characteristic tendency—which we have already seen illustrated in the story of Abraham—to idealize the patriarchs and their times, it assigns to the departure of Jacob a much more innocent reason than that which was assigned in the older documents represented in the previous chapter. There Jacob's flight is directly due to his deception of Isaac, and his consequent fear of the vengeance of Esau; here it is simply a departure in order to find a suitable wife, and to avoid the snare into which Esau had fallen, of marrying a native of the land.

The very attractive story in vss. 10–22 rests upon the two older documents, the Jehovist and the Elohist. In vss. 13, 16 the name of the Deity is Jehovah: "surely Jehovah is in this place;" in vss. 12, 17, 20, 22 it is Elohim. The two stories have been skilfully enough combined, but it is still quite possible to trace their main outlines. In the one case it is angels that Abraham sees, the angels of God, ascending and descending upon the ladder, (vs. 12), and he says: "This is the house of God" (vs. 17); in the other it is Jehovah himself whom he sees, standing beside him (vs. 13), and he says: "Surely *Jehovah* is in this place."

II. EXPOSITION

It would not be wise to delay long over vss. 1–5. They are interesting as illustrating the later treatment of the patriarchal history; but the real sequel of chap. 27 is to be found, not in these verses, but in vss. 10–22.

Jacob left his father's home (26:23) on his flight toward Haran. At night he rested, as if by accident, at a certain place, which proved to be the scene of a divine revelation. The place was rocky, and with one of the stones for a pillow he dreamt a dream, suggested by the climbing rocks of the mountain-side. He seemed to see a ladder, whose foot was on earth,

[4] International Sunday-School Lesson for April 7, 1907.

but whose top was in heaven. By this ladder angels were descending from the gate of heaven down to the earth, so that, unlike the customary view of angels, these creatures cannot be supposed to have been winged. Overcome with glad awe Jacob said: "How dread is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and the gate of heaven" (vs. 17). It would be quite unfair to the spirit of this ancient story to take it metaphorically. It suggests to us, of course, that heaven is not far from the earth, and that between the two there is divine communication. But the primary meaning of the story is more literal than this. Heaven is a place with a gate, just immediately above Bethel, and the angels who visit the earth reach it by a ladder, the foot of which is at Bethel. This is the Elohist's version.

There are no angels, however, in the Jehovist version (vss. 13–16). There it is Jehovah himself who appears, and he not only appears, but speaks, renewing to Jacob the promise made to Abraham and Isaac, and adding a promise special to Jacob himself—that he himself would be with the lonely wanderer, and bring him back to his own land. Both stories agree in the fact that the sleeping Jacob was visited by celestial beings: in the one case by angels, who descended to the spot where he is lying; in the other by Jehovah himself, who promises his continual help. Each story accounts, in its own way, for the sanctity of Bethel. When this story was written, Bethel was, and had for long been, a very popular sanctuary. Keen interest would naturally be taken in its origin, and tradition traced it back to Jacob.

Bethel means literally "house of God." In vs. 17 the Hebrew runs: "This is none other than the *beth elohim*," which perhaps originally meant "the house of the elohim," which is strictly a plural word; and the elohim are probably to be identified with the angels of vs. 12. Bethel would then be so called because the supernatural beings, the Elohim, had been seen by Jacob there.

But another explanation of the word lurks beneath the story in vss. 18, 19. Jacob took the stone on which he had been lying, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. The pouring of oil is a religious act, and the pillar is therefore not a common memorial pillar. It is the regular word in the Old Testament for the pillar which used to stand beside, not only the heathen altars, but even the altars of Jehovah, though it was afterward definitely proscribed by the Jehovah religion (Deut. 16:22) as carrying with it heathen associations. It is practically certain that in earlier times the deity was supposed to reside in the stone; that would explain why it was anointed. According, therefore, to the ancient idea, *the stone itself was the house of God*, the bethel; indeed, this is expressly stated in vs. 22,

and the stone standing beside the Bethel altar when the author wrote, was carried back by tradition to Jacob and his experiences. Thus there are two explanations of the word "bethel;" in the one, it is the house of the elohim, the place where the celestial beings alighted, in their descent, upon the earth; in the other, the word is applicable primarily and strictly to the stone which was the house of the god. In either case the religious ideas, though profoundly suggestive, are primitive.

Vss. 20–22. The vow is also primitive. It is made almost in the spirit of a man driving a bargain; if Jehovah favors Jacob, he will worship Jehovah. Jacob's requests are also purely material; all he asks is food, clothes, and prosperity; and he promises, if his requests be granted, to give the tenth to God.

The whole story is told partly to illustrate the origin of the Bethel sanctuary and the origin of the practice of offering tithes.

III. APPLICATION

The passage is intensely interesting, and shows, better than most, how profoundly suggestive are the simple religious ideas even of primitive times. *God appears in unexpected places.* Jacob had left his home, with its familiar religious associations; but God was greater than the home and the land he left, and Jacob found him—or, rather, God came to him—upon a bare hillside. And not only did he come to him there, but he also inspired him with the assurance that he would be with him everywhere, keeping him throughout his pilgrimage whithersoever he went. To all of us, pilgrims as we are on life's way, but especially to the young who are just setting out upon it, this is a consolation and inspiration of the very first order. The pilgrim's guide is God; and when we leave the familiar scenes we love, he goes before us and with us. "I am with thee, and will keep thee whithersoever thou goest; for I will not leave thee."

> "To me remains nor place nor time;
> My country is in every clime;
> I can be calm and free from care
> On any shore, since God is there."

This thought lies very close to the other thought suggested by the ladder with the angels upon it, that *heaven is not far from earth.* Between the two there is communication. The pilgrim may be desolate, compelled to camp, as it were, upon some rocky hillside of life; but even upon those barren stretches he may be visited by experiences which so cheer and assure him that he knows they are sent, like angels, from above, and that from the depths he may ascend upon them to the very gate of heaven.

Finally, the last verse is fitted to teach us *the duty of practical gratitude.* We are debtors to God, and we ought to thank him more than we do. In most prayers, it is petition and not thanksgiving that predominates. But gratitude should not be allowed to remain a mere sentiment; it should find some practical expression. How much the tithe will be, and what form it will take, is a question which each must decide for himself in the light of conscience and Christian principle; but when God has so long kept us on the way we have been going, giving us bread to eat and raiment to put on, is it not fitting that we should give back the tenth, or some other tangible and practical expression of our gratitude, to him?

God Gives Jacob a New Name: Gen. 32:9–12, 22–30[5]

I. LITERARY SOURCES

The prayer of Jacob (vss. 9–12) comes from the Jehovist document, as we may infer from the appeal to Jehovah in vs. 10; but the precise analysis of vss. 22–30 is very difficult. It is hardly worth while, for our purpose, attempting to make it out, but in some places the duplicates are quite obvious. For example, according to vs. 22, Jacob took his wives and children and passed over the ford of the Jabbok; according to vss. 23, 24, he is said to have sent them over, and remained behind alone. The sources underlying the narrative are undoubtedly the Jehovist and the Elohist.

II. EXPOSITION

After twenty years in a foreign land, Jacob is now coming home; but, prosperous though he is, his ancient sin has followed him, and he is haunted by fear of the brother he had wronged in the long ago (vs. 7). But he is still the wily, resourceful Jacob. He knows that it will be wisdom to appease the wrath of Esau, so he sends a gracious message on before, which is also calculated to impress Esau with a sense of the wealth and importance to which he has attained in the interval; and, when his messengers bring back the news that his brother is coming to meet him with a band of armed men, resourceful as ever, he divides his own company into two bands to make as sure as possible, under the circumstances, that at least some of them will escape.

It is at this point that the beautiful prayer occurs. Gunkel may be right in supposing that the prayer, with its fine spiritual tone, is later than the Peniel story of the context, whose religious ideas are primitive. Be that as it may, the setting which has been given it by its editor is very suggestive. It is a practical acknowledgment, on the part of Jacob, that his cunning is

[5] International Sunday-School Lesson for April 14, 1907.

inadequate to the situation in which he finds himself. He needs the help of God, so he resorts to prayer.

The prayer itself is unusually beautiful. The speaker begins by invoking Jehovah as the God of his father and grandfather, and claims this God as his own God. The God who guided and helped them could guide and help him; and, indeed, he was the God who had already, in the most marked and definite way, come into his life, visiting him with words of promise long ago at the beginning of his pilgrimage, and impelling him at the end to return to his own country; for it was his voice that had said: "Return to thy country and I will do thee good." By the terms of his invocation he reminds himself that God is pledged to take care of him; and then he proceeds to the prayer. It begins with an expression of thanksgiving, couched in terms of exquisite humility: "I am not worthy of all the kindness and the faithfulness which thou hast shewed to thy servant." And how real and definite to him was that kindness and faithfulness we see from the concrete picture of his experience he at once proceeds to add: he had left the land with nothing but his staff, now he was coming back to it with two large camps. It is not till the thanksgiving is over that he ventures to express the petition which is the ultimate object of his prayer—that he may be delivered from the impending danger at the hand of his brother. And he ends by pleading the divine promise.

The next passage (vss. 22–32) moves on a somewhat different religious plane. Jacob is now at the Jabbok, the stream which flows westward into the Jordan, about twenty-five miles north of the Dead Sea. The great crisis of his life has come, and the writer describes the scene with great power. He makes us feel the loneliness, the mystery, the weirdness of it, as Jacob remains in the dead of night on the bank of the stream, after sending his company on before. He is alone, yet not alone; for "there wrestled with him a man"—not, as the sequel makes plain, an ordinary man, but a supernatural visitant who turns out to be God himself. The purely historical interpretation which is interested in truth, rather than in sermons, has to ask what this means. The primitive nature of the religious conceptions underlying the story is undeniable. It has to be noted that the being who wrestles with Jacob does so "till the breaking of the day," and then he asks to be let go. This is in accordance with the idea, already illustrated by Gen. 15:12, 13, which associates deity with the darkness. The "man" with whom Jacob wrestles is clearly conceived as a supernatural being. Note further that "he could not prevail against" Jacob. It is he who asks to be let go, so that Jacob is the victor. This fact throws some light on the earliest form of the Jacob stories. Apparently Jacob was originally

conceived as a man of superhuman strength, a sort of Hebrew Hercules; another hint of this is to be found in Gen. 29:10, where he could roll away the great stone from the mouth of the well. Jacob is strong as well as cunning; and though wounded in the struggle, he is determined to secure a blessing from this mysterious Being before he goes, as go he must, when the day dawns. The blessing takes the form of a change of name: "Jacob" becomes "Israel." The cunning one becomes one who perseveres with God and prevails. His life has been a successful struggle, and in the impending struggle with Esau he will prevail again. So "he blessed him there"—that is, at Peniel; this, then, is the origin of the sanctuary at Peniel. The word "Peniel" means "face of God," and as a promontory on the Phoenician coast bore this very name, it is possible that the same name was given to some great rock or mountain-side near the Jabbok which looked like a gigantic face. The Jacob story, of course, interprets the name differently.

Here, as elsewhere, etymological interests play an important part. They are very plain here and in the name "Israel;" but no less in the word "Jabbok." The Hebrew for "he wrestled" in vss. 24, 25 is *jēābeq*, which the writer evidently intends to be connected with Jabbok.

III. APPLICATION

The prayer of Jacob (vss. 9–12) is full of suggestion. Coming immediately after the recital of Jacob's skilfully laid plans, it has an almost dramatic effect. God is the ever-present, and too-often-neglected, factor in human life; but the great crises drive men to feel and acknowledge their need of him—their own resources and plans are so obviously inadequate. Again, prayer gathers its confidence, in part, from the contemplation of the past. As Jacob prayed to the God of his father, so we may pray to the God of our fathers—the God who has manifestly moved in history and who has in the past touched our own individual lives. Further, the man must approach his God in the spirit of humility, with such a knowledge of himself as teaches him that he is not worthy of all the divine kindness which has marked his life. Again, prayer should begin with thanksgiving; at any rate, petition should be accompanied, at some point, by a humble expression of gratitude for the past. In most of our prayers there is, if not too much petition, at any rate too little thanksgiving.

To one who is convinced of the truth of the historical interpretation of vss. 22–30 given above, the homiletic application will be, at first sight, attended with difficulties. In the original story Jacob's wrestling is not prayer; as Gunkel humorously says, "in the struggles of prayer one does not

dislocate one's thigh." Nevertheless, the passage is full of suggestion. Jacob is facing a great crisis, and in that crisis is God. It is with him rather than with Esau that he has to reckon: only when he has seen God face to face is he worthy to enter into the promised land. It is really God whom he has now to face; and when he is certain of this, he wishes further to make himself sure of the blessing which God alone can give. But, as Driver says, "he only gains the blessing after his natural self has been rendered powerless." "I will not let thee go until thou bless me," is a word which every man who would face a crisis triumphantly must learn to make his own. The mightiest wrestler meets some time with a Wrestler mightier than himself, and he leaves the contest at once vanquished and victor. He has won the blessing, but, like Jacob who left limping upon his thigh, he may carry the mark of the struggle with him to his grave. He is wounded in that on which he prided himself most; but what of that, if he wins the blessing?